

MRIP HMS Tournament Project Kick-off Meeting
April 8th 2008

NOAA Fisheries Headquarters
Silver Spring Maryland

Summary

Participants: Arietta Venizelos (NOAA SEFSC), Rick Weber (ICCAT AP member, South Jersey Marina), Steve James (Boston Big Game Fishing Club), Greg Skomal (Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries), Dave Loomis (University of Massachusetts), John Foster (NOAA Fisheries Statistics), Ron Salz (NOAA Fisheries Statistics)

Review Project Plan: purpose, goals & objectives

- Ron provided a brief overview of MRIP and how the HMS tournament project fits into the bigger picture. The project team then reviewed the goals and objective as described in the project plan.

Current Status of HMS Tournament Data

Recreational Billfish Survey (RBS)

- Arietta provided an overview. RBS in place since the 1970's. Currently sample about 220 tournaments each year. Attempted census of all tournaments (Atlantic, Gulf, Caribbean) with a billfish category. Arietta said they're getting about 95% compliance from registered billfish tournaments. Some (probably smaller) tournaments may not even register. Recently a tournament was fined \$15K for not registering. Tournament directors fill out summary forms that include fishing dates, total boats, total hours fished, and number of billfish/tuna (by species) kept, lost, released (alive/dead) and tagged. Length/weight data are also collected.

Discussion about RBS followed:

- Ron initiated a discussion about data gaps. Some tournaments are out of range and don't report all hookups so released and lost counts may be low. Rick said they offer prizes for most released fish so RBS release data should be accurate. Some landed fish may not be weighed if they don't place. Rick said he sees fish being weighed that are not placing and only a very small percent of landed fish are not weighed. Greg said in many Massachusetts tournaments there is not much incentive for reporting releases and landings for species other than billfish. He said RBS is probably missing some of these. RBS tuna data does go to ICCAT assessment folks but not sure how it is used. Gerry Scott did an analysis comparing RBS with LPS and MRFSS for tuna data. Sharks are not included on the form at all.

Steve mentioned that billfish can be a bycatch for some tournaments. If not listed as a target species these may not be reported to RBS. Rick confirmed that this does happen. Steve said in 2008 some tournaments may drop billfish from target list so they don't have to use circle hooks.

- A big gap is there is no program similar to RBS for sharks and tunas. Rick suggested expanding RBS to cover all HMS tournaments (not just billfish). Under current rule if a tournament is selected reporting is mandatory (not just billfish). Arietta said this could backfire if we overburden directors. Ron said currently RBS covers about 2/3 rd's of all registered tournaments (about 1/2 in LPS area from ME-VA).
- John presented slides showing the 2007 distribution of registered tournaments by state, month, species, and RBS reports.
- Other comments:
 - Rick said with high fuel prices people condense into tournaments and fish less outside tournaments. Rick and Greg agreed that the percent of HMS tournament trips (of all HMS trips) may be increasing.
 - Steve said so far his big tournaments are down 20% in 2008 registrations. Rick said it is early and people may be waiting to sign up.

MA Sportfishing Tournament Monitoring Program

- Greg provided an overview. Program started in 1988 using RBS as a model but expanding to all HMS species. They have good relationships with directors. Data are collected by MDMF staff attending tournaments. MDMF use catch data to develop abundance indices. Near census of all landings and releases. Some tournaments have release incentives but many don't so release data may not be complete. They miss some boats not returning to the tournament location. MDMF attempts to track these boats down after the tournament to fill in the data gaps. Non reporting boats are assumed to have no catch. Steve said sometimes boats are too embarrassed to post their catches on the board.
- Trends in catch rates could be affected by changes in tournament rules and structure. For example, Steve said that blue sharks used to be worth 1 point but now are worth nothing (as of this year); this could affect catch rates if people aren't targeting them.

Large Pelagics Survey

- Ron gave a presentation on the LPS and how HMS tournaments are currently incorporated into the LPS design.

HMS catch card programs

- Ron briefly talked about the catch card programs in Maryland and North Carolina. Catch cards include a field for tournament (Y/N) and tournament name. Ron presented some bluefin tuna tournament data from the MD program.

Puerto Rico Tournament Sampling

- Ron mentioned that Puerto Rico DNER attempts a census of all HMS tournaments. They send biologists to about 30 per year.
- Ron and Arietta recently had a conference call with DNER to discuss ways to increase compliance with RBS in Puerto Rico.

Identification of potential biases and coverage gaps

- John presented some preliminary results from analyses of LPS data. Data from 2003-2007 suggest that tournament trips may be overrepresented on the dockside (LPIS) compared to what the phone (LPTS) data show. This is more apparent for private boat mode than for charter. John then showed differences in CPUE (both release and kept) between tournament and non-tournament trips for select species. His analysis looked at differences from 2002-2007 by state, mode and month. Results varied considerably by species. For white marlin tournament CPUE was typically higher but for some of the tunas the trend was less clear. It is important to note that CPUE's (for both tournament and non-tournament) were calculated using all trips, not just those targeting a particular species.
- Ron presented results of an analysis that post-stratified the LPS white marlin released estimate into tournament and non-tournament. The post-stratified estimate for tournament releases tracked very closely to the RBS white marlin released estimate from 2003-2007 (2002 was not as close).

Discussion of New Approaches and Design of Pilot Study

The remainder of the meeting was spent discussing alternative approaches to improving HMS tournament sampling. Ron discussed the three basic alternatives: 1) modified survey, 2) attempted census, and 3) dual-frame (combination approach). Ron said the LPS design could be modified to treat tournaments as a separate strata and/or to assign different site/cluster pressures for tournament days.

Ron suggested that two (or more) approaches could be run side-by-side for comparisons and validation purposes. The project team agreed that if we can attempt to census all or some subset of tournaments in the LPS area we can compare with the LPS stratified survey results. Comparisons could also be made between our census data and what gets reported to RBS.

Ron said that we are in the process of contracting with Dave Loomis and his graduate student from UMASS Amherst. The graduate student will be able to assist with tournament data collection. Arietta suggested that John Graves and his students might be able to help out at the tournaments they attend. Arietta mentioned the Miami Marine Affairs program as a source for grad students who need internships to sample at tournaments.

If we can't physically be at all tournaments we might want to attend the larger ones and get information from the smaller ones by some other means (e.g., phone, mail, and fax).

Dave said they can do a mail survey for \$5 per vessel. Steve thought that response rates may be low on a mail survey. Arietta said there are a lot of smaller tournaments that don't catch much year after year. The team agreed that we should focus our dockside sampling efforts on the larger tournaments. Rick said the UMASS grad student would have unlimited access to South Jersey marina tournament data. Ron asked if we can get the directors to give us lists of boats and phone numbers for validation purposes, tracking boats that don't report and to sample tournaments we cannot attend.

Rick estimated that 10-15% of boats in his tournaments don't report their catch. Greg said only about 50% report initially but they get about 70% after tracking boats down after the tournament.

Rick asked why doesn't anyone collect HMS permit number from tournaments. Greg said tournament directors may not want to collect this information (what if a boat wins prize money but doesn't have permit?). Steve and Rick said the only boat identifier they collect is boat name. Steve said he'd rather collect HMS permit number than state registration or coast guard.